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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



The House of the Worm

By MEARLE PROUT

'A powerful story of a hideous blight that spread from an unholy forest and menaced mankind with destruction'

"But see, amid the mimic rout
A crawling shape intrude!
A blood-red thing that writhes from out
The scenic solitude!
It writhes!—it writhes!—with mortal pangs
The mimes become its food,
And the angels sob at vermin fangs
In human gore imbued."

—Edgar Allan Poe

FOR hours I had sat at my study table, trying in vain to feel and transmit to paper the sensations of a criminal in the death-house. You know how one may strive for hours—even days—to attain a desired effect, and then feel a sudden swift rhythm, and know he has found it? But how often, as though

Fate herself intervened, does interruption come and mar, if not cover completely, the road which for a moment gleamed straight and white! So it was with me.

Scarcely had I lifted my hands to the keys when my fellow-roomer, who had long been bent quietly over a magazine, said, quietly enough:

"That moon—I wonder if even it really exists!"

I turned sharply. Fred was standing at the window, looking with a singularly rapt attention into the darkness.

Curious, I rose and went to him, and



"And the sounds, the cries to which they gave vent as our flaming torches smote full upon their sightless, staring eyes!"

followed his gaze into the night. There was the moon, a little past its full, but still nearly round, standing like a great red shield close above the tree-tops, yet real enough. . . .

Something in the strangeness of my friend's behavior prevented the irritation which his unfortunate interruption would ordinarily have caused.

"Just why did you say that?" I asked, after a moment's hesitation.

Shamefacedly he laughed, half apologetic. "I'm sorry I spoke aloud," he said. "I was only thinking of a bizarre theory I ran across in a story."

"About the moon?"

"No. Just an ordinary ghost story of the type you write. *While Pan Walks* is its name; and there was nothing in it about the moon."

He looked again at the ruddy globe, now lighting the darkened street below with a pale, tenuous light. Then he spoke: "You know, Art, that idea has taken hold of me; perhaps there *is* something to it after all. . . ."

Theories of the bizarre have always enthralled Fred, as they always hold a romantic appeal for me. And so, while he revolved his latest fancy in his mind, I waited expectantly.

"Art," he began at last, "do you believe that old theory about thoughts becoming realities? I mean, thoughts of men having a physical manifestation?"

I reflected a moment, before giving way to a slight chuckle. "Once," I answered, "a young man said to Carlyle that he had decided to accept the material world as a reality; to which the older man only re-

plied, 'Egad, you'd better!' . . . Yes," I continued, "I've often run across the theory, but——"

"You've missed the point," was the quick rejoinder. "Accept your physical world, and what do you have?—Something that was created by God! And how do we know that all creation has stopped? Perhaps even we——"

He moved to a book-shelf, and in a moment returned, dusting off a thick old leather-bound volume.

"I first encountered the idea here," he said, as he thumbed the yellowed pages, "but it was not until that bit of fiction pressed it into my mind that I thought of it seriously. Listen:

"The Bible says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." From what did He create it? Obviously, it was created by thought, imagery, force of will if you please. The Bible further says: "So God created man in His own image." Does this not mean that man has all the attributes of the Almighty, only upon a smaller scale? Surely, then, if the mind of God in its omnipotence could create the entire universe, the mind of man, being made in the image of God, and being his counterpart on earth, could in the same way, if infinitely smaller in degree, create things of its own will.

"For example, the old gods of the dawn-world. Who can say that they did not exist in reality, being created by man? And, once created, how can we tell whether they will not develop into something to harass and destroy, beyond all control of their creators? *If this be true, then the only way to destroy them is to cease to believe.* Thus it is that the old gods died when man's faith turned from them to Christianity."

He was silent a moment, watching me as I stood musing.

"Strange where such thoughts can lead

a person," I said. "How are we to know which things are real and which are fancies—racial fantasies, I mean, common in all of us. I think I see what you meant when you wondered if the moon were real."

"But imagine," said my companion, "a group of people, a cult, all thinking the same thoughts, worshipping the same imaginary figure. What might not happen, if their fanaticism were such that they thought and felt deeply? A physical manifestation, alien to those of us who did not believe. . . ."

And so the discussion continued. And when at last we finally slept, the moon which prompted it all was hovering near the zenith, sending its cold rays upon a world of hard physical reality.

NEXT morning we both arose early—Fred to go back to his prosaic work as a bank clerk, I to place myself belatedly before my typewriter. After the diversion of the night before, I found that I was able to work out the bothersome scene with little difficulty, and that evening I mailed the finished and revised manuscript.

When my friend came in he spoke calmly of our conversation the night before, even admitting that he had come to consider the theory a rank bit of metaphysics.

Not quite so calmly did he speak of the hunting-trip which he suggested. Romantic fellow that he was, his job at the bank was sheer drudgery, and any escape was rare good fortune. I, too, with my work out of the way and my mind clear, was doubly delighted at the prospect.

"I'd like to shoot some squirrels," I agreed. "And I know a good place. Can you leave tomorrow?"

"Yes, tomorrow; my vacation starts then," he replied. "But for a long time

I've been wanting to go back to my old stamping-grounds. It's not so very far—only a little over a hundred miles, and"—he looked at me in apology for differing with my plans—"in Sacrament Wood there are more squirrels than you ever saw."

And so it was agreed.

SACRAMENT WOOD is an anomaly. Three or four miles wide and twice as long, it fills the whole of a peculiar valley, a rift, as it were, in the rugged topography of the higher Ozarks. No stream flows through it, there is nothing suggesting a normal valley; it is merely there, by sheer physical presence defying all questions. Grim, tree-flecked mountains hem it in on every side, as though seeking by their own ruggedness to compensate this spot of gentleness and serenity. And here lies the peculiarity: though the mountains around are all inhabited—sparsely, of course, through necessity—the valley of the wood, with every indication of a wonderful fertility, has never felt the plow; and the tall, smooth forest of scented oak has never known the ax of the woodman.

I too had known Sacrament Wood; it was generally recognized as a sportsman's paradise, and twice, long before, I had hunted there. But that was so long ago that I had all but forgotten, and now I was truly grateful to have been reminded of it again. For if there is a single place in the world where squirrels grow faster than they can be shot, it is Sacrament Wood.

It was midafternoon when we finally wound up the last mountain trail to stop at last in a small clearing. A tiny shanty with clapboard roof stood as ornament beside the road, and behind it a bent figure in faded overalls was chopping the withered stalks of cotton.

"That would be old Zeke," confided my companion, his eyes shining with even this reminder of childhood. "Hallo!" he shouted, stepping to the ground.

The old mountaineer straightened, and wrinkled his face in recognition. He stood thus a moment, until my companion inquired as to the hunting; then his eyes grew dull again. He shook his head dumbly.

"Ain't no hunting now, boys. Everything is dead. Sacrament Wood is dead."

"Dead!" I cried. "Impossible! Why is it dead?"

I knew in a moment that I had spoken without tact. The mountaineer has no information to give one who expresses a desire for it—much less an outlander who shows incredulity.

The old man turned back to his work. "Ain't no hunting now," he repeated, and furiously attacked a stalk of cotton.

So obviously dismissed, we could not remain longer. "Old Zeke has lived too long alone," confided Art as we moved away. "All mountaineers get that way sooner or later."

But I could see that his trip was already half spoiled, and even fancied he was nettled with me for my unfortunate interruption. Still, he said nothing, except to note that Sacrament Wood was our next valley.

We continued. The road stretched ahead for some distance along the level top. And then, as we started the rough descent, Sacrament Wood burst full upon our view, clothed as I had never before seen it. Bright red, yellow, and brown mingled together in splashes of beauty, as the massive trees put on their autumnal dress. Almost miniature it appeared to us from our lookout, shimmering like a mountain lake in the dry heat of early fall. Why, as we gazed for a moment

silently, did a vague thought of uncleanness make a shudder pass through my body? Was I sensitive to the ominous words of the old mountaineer? Or did my heart tell me what my mind could not—that the season was yet too early to destroy every trace of greenery, and replace it with the colors of death? Or was it something else?—something not appealing to the senses, nor yet to the intellect, but yet sending a message too strong to be dismissed?

But I did not choose to dwell long upon the subject. The human mind, I have long known, in striving to present a logical sequence of events, often strains the fabric of fact for the sake of smoothness. Perhaps I really felt nothing, and my present conceptions have been altered by subsequent events. At any rate, Fred, although unnaturally pale, said nothing, and we continued the descent in silence.

NIGHT comes early in the deep valley of Sacrament Wood. The sun was just resting on the high peak in the west as we entered the forest and struck camp. But long after comparative darkness had come over us, the mountain down which we had come was illuminated a soft gold.

We sat over our pipes in the gathering dusk. It was deeply peaceful, there in the darkening wood, and yet— Fred and I were unnaturally silent, perhaps having the same thoughts. Why were the massive trees so early shorn of leaves? Why had the very birds ceased to sing? Whence came the faint, yet unmistakable odor of *rotteness*?

A cheery fire soon dispelled our fears. We were again the two hunters, rejoicing in our freedom and our anticipation. At least, I was. Fred, however, somewhat overcame my feeling of security.

"Art, whatever the cause, we must admit that Sacrament Wood *is* dead.

Why, man, those trees are not getting ready for dormance; they are dead. Why haven't we heard birds? Bluejays used to keep this place in a continual uproar. And where did I get the feeling I had as we entered here? Art, I am sensitive to these things. I can *feel* a graveyard in the darkest night; and that is how I felt as I came here—as if I was entering a graveyard. I *know*, I tell you!"

"I felt it, too," I answered, "and the odor, too. . . . But all that is gone now. The fire changes things."

"Yes, the fire changes things. Hear that moaning in the trees? You think that is the wind? Well, you're wrong, I tell you. That is not the wind. Something not human is suffering; maybe the fire hurts it."

I laughed, uncomfortably enough. "Come," I said, "you'll be giving me the jimmies, too. I felt the same way you did; I even smelt the odor, but the old man just had us upset. That's all. The fire has changed things. It's all right now."

"Yes," he said, "it's all right now."

For all his nervousness, Fred was the first to sleep that night. We heaped the fire high before turning in, and I lay for a long while and watched the leaping flames. And I thought about the fire.

"Fire is clean," I said to myself, as though directed from without. "Fire is clean; fire is life. The very life of our bodies is preserved by oxidation. Yes, without fire there would be no cleanliness in the world."

But I too must have dropped off, for when I was awakened by a low moan the fire was dead. The wood was quiet; not a whisper or rustle of leaves disturbed the heavy stillness of the night. And then I sensed the odor. . . . Once sensed, it grew and grew until the air seemed heavy, even massive with the inertia of it,

seemed to press itself into the ground through sheer weight. It eddied and swirled in sickening waves of smell. It was the odor of death, and putridity.

I heard another moan.

"Fred," I called, my voice catching in my throat.

The only answer was a deeper moan.

I grasped his arm, and—my fingers sank in the bloated flesh as into a rotting corpse! The skin burst like an over-ripe berry, and slime flowed over my hand and dripped from my fingers.

Overcome with horror, I struck a light; and under the tiny flare I saw for a moment—his face! Purple, bloated, the crawling flesh nearly covered his staring eyes; white worms swarmed his puffed body, exuded squirming from his nostrils, and fell upon his livid lips. The foul stench grew stronger; so thick was it that my tortured lungs cried out for relief. Then, with a shriek of terror, I cast the lighted match from me, and threw myself into the bed, and buried my face in the pillow.

How long I lay there, sick, trembling, overcome with nausea, I do not know. But I slowly became aware of a rushing sound in the tree-tops. Great limbs creaked and groaned; the trunks themselves seemed to crack in agony. I looked up, and saw a ruddy light reflected about us. And like a crash of thunder came the thought into my brain:

"Fire is clean; fire is life. Without fire there would be no cleanliness in the world."

And at this command I rose, and grasped everything within reach, and cast it upon the dying flames. Was I mistaken, or was the odor of death really less? I hauled wood, and heaped the fire high. Fortunate indeed that the match I had thrown had fallen in the already sere leaves!

When next I thought of my companion the roaring blaze was leaping fifteen feet in air. Slowly I turned, expecting to see a corpse writhing in a miasma of filth, and saw—a man calmly sleeping! His face was flushed, his hands still slightly swollen; but he was clean! He breathed. Could I, I asked, have dreamed of death, and of the odor of death? Could I have dreamed the *worms*?

I awoke him, and waited.

He half looked at me, and then, gazing at the fire, gave a cry of ecstasy. A light of bliss shone for a moment in his eyes, as in a young child first staring at the mystery of cleansing flame; and then, as realization came, this too faded into a look of terror and loathing.

"The worms!" he cried. "The maggots! The odor came, and with it the worms. And I awoke. Just as the fire died. . . . I couldn't move; I couldn't cry out. The worms came—I don't know whence; from nowhere, perhaps. They came, and they crawled, and they ate. And the smell came with them! It just appeared, as did the worms, from out of thin air! It just—became! Then—death! I died, I tell you—I rotted—I rotted, and the worms—the maggots—they ate. . . . I am *dead*, I say! DEAD! Or should be!" He covered his face with his hands.

How we lived out the night without going mad, I do not know. All through the long hours we kept the fire burning high; and all through the night the lofty trees moaned back their mortal agony. The rotting death did not return; in some strange way the fire kept us clean of it, and fought it back. But our brains felt, and dimly comprehended, the noisome evil floundering in the darkness, and the pain which our immunity gave this devilish forest.

I could not understand why Fred had so easily fallen a victim to the death, while I remained whole. He tried to explain that his brain was more receptive, more sensitive.

"Sensitive to what?" I asked.

But he did not know.

Dawn came at last, sweeping westward before it the web of darkness. From across the forest, and around us on all sides, the giant trees rustled in pain, suggesting the gnashing of millions of agonized teeth. And over the ridge to eastward came the smiling sun, lighting with holy clarity the branches of our wood.

Never was a day so long in coming, and never so welcome its arrival. In a half-hour our belongings were gathered, and we quickly drove to the open road.

"Fred, you remember our conversation of a couple of evenings ago?" I asked my companion, after some time of silence. "I'm wondering whether that couldn't apply here."

"Meaning that we were the victims of —hallucination? Then how do you account for this?" He raised his sleeve above his elbow, showing his arm. How well did I remember it! For there, under curling skin and red as a brand, was the print of my hand!

"I sensed, not felt, you grip me last night," said Fred. "There is our evidence."

"Yes," I answered, slowly. "We've got lots to think of, you and I."

And we rode together in silence.

When we reached home, it was not yet noon, but the brightness of the day had already wrought wonders with our perspective. I think that the limitation of the human mind, far from being a curse, is the most merciful thing in the world. We live on a quiet, sheltered island of ignorance, and from the single

current flowing by our shores we visualize the vastness of the black seas around us, and see—simplicity and safety. And yet, if only a portion of the cross-currents and whirling vortexes of mystery and chaos could be revealed to our consciousness, we should immediately go insane.

But we can not see. When a single cross-current upsets the calm placidness of the visible sea, we refuse to believe. Our minds balk, and can not understand. And thus we arrive at that strange paradox: after an experience of comprehensible terror, the mind and body remain long upset; yet even the most terrible encounters with things unknown fade into insignificance in the light of clear day. We were soon about the prosaic task of preparing lunch, to satisfy seemingly insatiable appetites!

And yet we by no means forgot. The wound on Fred's arm healed quickly; in a week not even a scar remained. But we were changed. We had seen the cross-current, and—we knew. By daylight a swift recollection often brought nausea; and the nights, even with the lights left burning, were rife with horror. Our very lives seemed bound into the events of one night.

Yet, even so, I was not prepared for the shock I felt when, one night nearly a month later, Fred burst into the room, his face livid.

"Read this," he said in a husky whisper, and extended a crumpled newspaper to my hand. I reached for it, read where he had pointed.

MOUNTAINEER DIES

Ezekiel Whipple, lone mountaineer, aged 64, was found dead in his cabin yesterday by neighbors.

The post-mortem revealed a terrible state of putrefaction; medical men aver that death could not have occurred less than two weeks ago.

The examination by the coroner revealed no sign of foul play, yet local forces for law and order are working upon what may yet be

valuable clue. Jesse Layton, a near neighbor and close friend of the aged bachelor, states that he visited and held conversation with him the day preceding; and it is upon this statement that anticipation of possible arrest is based.

"God!" I cried. "Does it mean—"

"Yes! It's spreading—whatever it is. It's reaching out, crawling over the mountains. God knows to where it may finally extend."

"It's coming from the wood," I said. "It's in the wood. It centers in the wood. It must be a terrible new disease. But—yes, God only knows to where it may finally extend."

"No. It is not a disease. It is alive. It's alive, Art! I tell you, I felt it; I *heard* it. I think it tried to talk to me."

For us there was no sleep that night. Every moment of our half-forgotten experience was relived a thousand times, every horror amplified by the darkness and our fears. We wanted to flee to some far country, to leave far behind us the terror we had felt. We wanted to stay and fight to destroy the destroyer. We wanted to plan; but—hateful thought—how could we plan to fight—nothing? We were as helpless as the old mountaineer. . . .

And so, torn by these conflicting desires, we did what was to be expected—precisely nothing. We might even have slipped back into the even tenor of our lives had not news dispatches showed still further spread, and more death.

Eventually, of course, we told our story. But lowered glances and obvious embarrassment told us too well how little we were believed. Indeed, who could expect normal people, with normal experiences, to believe the obviously impossible? And so, to save ourselves, we talked no more, but watched in dread from the side-lines the slow, implacable growth.

IT WAS midwinter before the first town fell in the way of the expanding circle. Only a mountain village of half a hundred inhabitants; but the death came upon them one cold winter night—late at night, for there were no escapes—and smothered all in their beds. And when the next day visitors found and reported them, there was described the same terrible advanced state of putrefaction that had been present in all the other cases.

Then the world, apathetic always, began to believe. But, even so, they sought the easiest, the most natural, explanation, and refused to recognize the possibilities we half outlined to them. Some new plague, they said, is threatening us, is ravaging our hill country. We will move away. . . . A few moved. But the optimists, trusting all to the physicians, stayed on. And we, scarce knowing why, stayed on with them.

Yes, the world was waking to the danger. The plague became one of the most popular topics of conversation. Revivalists predicted the end of the world. And the physicians, as usual, set to work. Doctors swarmed the infected district, in fear of personal safety examined the swollen corpses, and found—the bacteria of decay, and—the worms. They warned the natives to leave the surrounding country; and then, to avoid panic, they added encouragement.

"We have an inkling of the truth," they said, after the best manner of the detective agency. "It is hoped that we may soon isolate the deadly bacterium, and produce an immunizing serum."

And the world believed. . . . I, too, half believed, and even dared to hope.

"It is a plague," I said, "some strange new plague that is killing the country. We were there, first of all."

But, "No," said Fred. "It is not a plague. I was there; I felt it; it talked to

me. It is Black Magic, I tell you! What we need is, not medicine, but medicine men."

And I—I half believed him, too!

SPRING came, and the encroaching menace had expanded to a circle ten miles in radius, with a point in the wood as a center. Slow enough, to be sure, but seemingly irresistible. . . . The quiet, lethal march of the disease, the *death*, as it was called, still remained a mystery—and a fear. And as week after week fled by with no good tidings from the physicians and men of science there assembled, my doubts grew stronger. Why, I asked, if it were a plague, did it never strike its victims during the day? What disease could strike down all life alike, whether animal or vegetable? It was not a plague, I decided; at least, I added, clutching the last thread of hope, not a normal plague.

"Fred," I said one day, "they can't stand fire—if you are right. This is your chance to prove that you are right. We'll burn the wood. We'll take kerosene. We'll burn the wood, and if you are right, the thing will die."

His face brightened. "Yes," he said, "we'll burn the wood, and—the thing will die. Fire saved me: I know it; you know it. Fire could never cure a disease; it could never make normal trees whisper and groan, and crack in agony. We'll burn the wood, and the thing will die."

So we said, and so we believed. And we set to work.

Four barrels of kerosene we took, and tapers, and torches. And on a clear, cold day in early March we set out in the truck. The wind snapped bitterly out of the north; our hands grew blue with chill in the open cab. But it was a clean cold. Before its pure sharpness, it was almost impossible to believe that we were head-

ing toward filth and a barren country of death. And, still low in the east, the sun sent its bright yellow shafts over the already budding trees.

It was still early in the morning when we arrived at the edge of the slowly enlarging circle of death. Here the last victim, only a day or so earlier, had met his end. Yet, even without this last to tell us of its nearness, we could have judged by the absence of all life. The tiny buds we had noted earlier were absent; the trees remained dry and cold as in the dead of winter.

Why did not the people of the region heed the warnings and move? True, most of them had done so. But a few old mountaineers remained—and died one by one.

We drove on, up the rocky, precipitous trail, leaving the bustle and safety of the normal world behind us. Was I wrong in thinking a shade had come over the sun? Were not things a trifle darker? Still I drove on in silence.

A faint stench assailed my nostrils—the odor of death. It grew and it grew. Fred was pale; and, for that matter, so was I. Pale—and weak.

"We'll light a torch," I said. "Perhaps this odor will die."

We lit a torch in the brightness of the day, then drove on.

Once we passed a pig-sty: white bones lay under the sun; the flesh was decayed and eaten away entirely. What terror had killed them while they slept?

I could not now be mistaken: the shade was deepening. The sun was still bright, but weak, in some strange way. It shone doubtfully, vacillating, as if there were a partial eclipse.

But the valley was near. We passed the last mountain, passed the falling cabin of the mountaineer who was the first to die. We started the descent.

Sacrament Wood lay below us, not fresh and green as I had seen it first, years before, nor yet flashing with color as on our last trip the autumn before. It was cold, and obscured. A black cloud lay over it, a blanket of darkness, a rolling mist like that which is said to obscure the River Styx. It covered the region of death like a heavy shroud, and hid it from our probing eyes. Could I have been mistaken, or did I hear a broad whisper rising from the unhallowed wood of the holy name? Or did I feel something I could not hear?

But in one respect I could not be wrong. It was growing dark. The farther we moved down the rocky trail, the deeper we descended into this stronghold of death, the paler became the sun, the more obscured our passage.

"Fred," I said in a low voice, "they are hiding the sun. They are destroying the light. The wood will be dark."

"Yes," he answered. "The light hurts them. I could feel their pain and agony that morning as the sun rose; they can not kill in the day. But now they are stronger, and are hiding the sun itself. The light hurts them, and they are destroying it."

We lit another torch and drove on.

When we reached the wood, the darkness had deepened, the almost palpable murk had thickened until the day had become as a moonlit night. But it was not a silver night. The sun was red; red as blood, shining on the accursed forest. Great red rings surrounded it, like the red rings of sleeplessness surrounding a diseased eye. No, the sun itself was not clean; it was weak, diseased, powerless as ourselves, before the new terror. Its red glow mingled with the crimson of the torches; and lit up the scene around us with the color of blood.

WE DROVE as far as solid ground would permit our passage—barely to the edge of the forest, where the wiry, scraggly growth of cedar and black-jack gave place to the heavy growth of taller, straighter oak. Then we abandoned our conveyance and stepped upon the rotting earth. And at this, more strongly it seemed than before, the stench of rottenness came over us. We were thankful that all animal matter had decayed entirely away; there only remained the acrid, penetrating odor of decaying plants; disagreeable, and powerfully suggestive to our already sharpened nerves, but endurable. . . . And it was warm, there in the death-ridden floor of the valley. In spite of the season of the year and the absence of the sun's warmth, it was not cold. The heat of decay, of fermentation, overcame the biting winds which occasionally swept down from the surrounding hills.

The trees were dead. Not only dead; they were rotten. Great limbs had crashed to the ground, and littered the soggy floor. All smaller branches were gone, but the trees themselves remained upright, their naked limbs stretched like supplicating arms to the heavens as these martyrs of the wood stood waiting. Yet in even these massive trunks the worms crawled—and ate. It was a forest of death, a nightmare, fungous forest that cried out to the invaders, that sobbed in agony at the bright torches, and rocked to and fro in all its unholy rottenness.

Protected by our torches, we were immune to the forces of death that were rampant in the dark reaches of the wood, beyond our flaring light. But while they could not prey upon our bodies, they called, they drew upon our minds. Pictures of horror, of putridity and eldritch nightmare thronged our brains. I saw again my comrade as he had lain in his

bed, over a half-year before; I thought of the mountain village, and of the three-score victims who had died there in one night.

We did not dare, we knew, to dwell on these things; we would go insane. We hastened to collect a pile of dead limbs. We grasped the dank, rotten things—limbs and branches which broke on lifting, or crumbled to dust between our fingers. At last, however, our heap was piled high with the dryest, the firmest of them, and over all we poured a full barrel of kerosene. And as we lit the vast pile, and watched the flames roar high and higher, a sigh of pain, sorrow and impotent rage swept the field of death.

"The fire hurts them," I said. "While there is fire they can not harm us; the forest will burn, and they will all die."

"But will the forest burn? Will they let it burn? They have dimmed the sun; they have even dimmed our torches. See! They should be brighter! Would the forest burn of itself, even if they let it alone? It is damp and rotten, and will not burn. See, our fire is burning out! We have failed."

Yes, we had failed. We were forced to admit it when, after two more trials, we were at last satisfied beyond any doubt that the forest could not be destroyed by fire. Our hearts had been strong with courage, but now fear haunted us, cold perspiration flooded our sick, trembling bodies as we sent the clattering truck hurtling up the rocky trail to safety. Our torches flared in the wind, and left a black trail of smoke behind us as we fled.

But, we promised ourselves, we would come again. We would bring many men, and dynamite. We would find where this thing had its capital, and would destroy it.

And we tried. But again we failed.

There were no more deaths. Even the most obstinate moved from the stricken country when spring came and revealed the actual presence of the deadly circle. No one could doubt the mute testimony of the dead and dying trees that fell in its grip. Fifty, a hundred or two hundred feet in a night the circle spread; trees that one day were fresh and alive, sprouting with shoots of green, were the next day harsh and yellow. The death never retreated. It advanced during the nights; held its ground during the day. And at night again the fearful march continued.

A condition of terror prevailed over the populations in adjoining districts. The newspapers carried in their columns nothing but blasted hopes. They contained long descriptions of each new advance; long, technical theories of the scientists assembled at the front of battle; but no hope.

We pointed this out to the terror-ridden people, told them that in our idea lay the only chance of victory. We outlined to them our plan, pleaded for their assistance. But, "No," they said. "The plague is spreading. It began in the wood, but it is out of the wood now. How would it help to burn the wood now? The world is doomed. Come with us, and live while you can. We must all die."

No, there was no one willing to listen to our plan. And so we went north, where the death, through its unfamiliarity and remoteness, had not yet disrupted society. Here the people, doubtful, hesitant, yet had faith in their men of science, still preserved order, and continued in industry. But our idea received no welcome. "We trust the doctors," they said.

And none would come.

"**F**RED," I told him, "we have not yet failed. We will equip a large truck. No! We will take a tractor, a huge machine that will run even through the forest. We will do as we said. Take more kerosene, and dynamite; we will destroy it yet!"

It was our last chance; we knew that. If we failed now, the world was indeed doomed. And we knew that every day the death grew stronger, and we worked fast to meet it.

The materials we needed we hauled overland in the truck; more torches, dynamite, eight barrels of kerosene. We even took two guns. And then we loaded all these in an improvised trailer behind the caterpillar, and started out.

The wood was dark now, although it was not yet midday when we entered. Black as a well at midnight was the forest; our torches sent their flickering red a scant twenty feet through the obstinate murk. And through the shivering darkness there reached our ears a vast murmur, as of a million hives of bees.

How we chose a path I do not know; I tried to steer toward the loudest part of the roar, hoping that by so doing we would find the source itself of the scourge. And our going was not difficult. The tractor laid down its endless track, crushing to paste beneath it the dank, rotting wood which littered the forest floor. And from behind, over the smooth track crushed through the forest, lumbered the heavy trailer.

The gaunt, scarred trees, shorn of every limb, stood around us like weird sentinels pointing the way. And, if possible, the scene grew more desolate the farther we proceeded; the creaking trunks standing pole-like seemed more and more rotten; the odor of death around us, not the sickening odor of decay, but the less noxious yet more penetrating smell of rot-

tenness complete, grew even more piercing. And *It* called and drew. From out of the darkness it crept into our brains, moved them, changed them to do its will. We did not know. We only knew that the odor around us no longer nauseated; it became the sweetest of perfumes to our nostrils. We only knew that the fungus-like trees pleased our eyes, seemed to fill and satisfy some long-hidden esthetic need. In my mind there grew a picture of a perfect world: damp, decayed vegetation and succulent flesh—rotting flesh—upon which to feed. Over all the earth, it seemed, this picture extended; and I shouted aloud in ecstasy.

At the half-involuntary shout, something flashed upon me, and I knew that these thoughts were not my own, but were foisted upon me from without. With a shriek, I reached to the torch above and bathed my arms in the living flame; I grasped the taper from its setting and brandished it in my comrade's face. The cleansing pain raced through my veins and nerves; the picture faded, the longing passed away; I was myself again. If only we had obeyed the call, gone forth into the shrilling forest! Yet, always after that, we could feel the obscene mind toying with ours, trying still to bend us to its purpose. And I shuddered when I recalled that those thoughts could well have been those of a worm!

Then, suddenly, above the roar from without and the steady beat of our engine, we heard a human chant. I idled the motor, jerked out the gears. Clear on our ears it smote now, a chant in a familiar, yet strangely altered tongue. Life! In this region of death? It was impossible! The chant ceased, and the hum among the poles of trees doubled in intensity. Someone, or something, rose to declaim. I strained my ears to hear,

but it was unnecessary; clear and loud through the noisome darkness rose its high semi-chant:

"Mighty is our lord, the Worm. Mightier than all the kings of heaven and of earth is the Worm. The gods create; man plans and builds; but the Worm effaces their handiwork.

"Mighty are the planners and the builders; great their works and their possessions. But at last they must fall heir to a narrow plot of earth; and even that, forsooth, the Worm will take away.

"This is the House of the Worm; his home which none may destroy; the home which we, his protectors, have made for him.

"O Master! On bended knee we give thee all these things! We give unto thee man and his possessions! We give unto thee the life of the earth to be thy morsel of food! We give unto thee the earth itself to be thy residence!

"Mighty, oh, mighty above all the kings of heaven and of earth is our lord and master, the Worm, to whom Time is naught!"

Sick with horror and repulsion, Fred and I exchanged glances. There was life! God knew what sort, but life, and human! Then, there in that forest of hell, with the odor, sight, and sound of death around us, we smiled! I swear we smiled! We were given a chance to fight; to fight something tangible. I raced the motor, snapped the machine into gear and pushed on.

And one hundred feet farther I stopped, for we were upon the worshippers! Half a hundred of them there were, crouching and kneeling, yes, even wallowing in the putrefaction and filth around them. And the sounds, the cries to which they gave vent as our flaming torches smote full upon their sightless, staring eyes! Only a madman could recall

and place upon the printed page the litanyes of hate and terror which they flung into our faces. There are vocal qualities peculiar to men, and vocal qualities peculiar to beasts; but nowhere this side of the pit of hell itself can be heard the raucous cries that issued from their straining throats as we grasped our tapers and raced toward them. A few moments only did they stand defiantly in our way; the pain of the unaccustomed light was too much for their sensitive eyes. With shrill shouts of terror they turned and fled. And we looked about us, upon the weltering filth with which we were surrounded, and—smiled again!

For we saw their idol! Not an idol of wood, or stone, or of any clean, normal thing. It was a heaped-up grave! Massive, twenty feet long and half as high, it was covered with rotting bones and limbs of trees. The earth, piled there in the gruesome mound, shivered and heaved as from some foul life within. Then, half buried in filth, we saw the headstone—itself a rotting board, leaning askew in its shallow setting. And on it was carved only the line: "The House of the Worm."

The house of the worm! A heaped-up grave! And the cult of blackness and death had sought to make of the world one foul grave, and to cover even that with a shroud of darkness!

WITH a shriek of rage I stamped my foot upon the earth piled there. The crust was thin, so thin that it broke through, and nearly precipitated me headlong into the pit itself; only a violent wrench backward prevented me from falling into the pitching mass of—worms! White, wriggling, the things squirmed there under our blood-red, flaring light, writhed with agony in the exquisite torture brought to them by the

presence of cleansing flame. The house of the worm, indeed. . . .

Sick with loathing, we worked madly. The roar of the alien forest had risen to a howl—an eldritch gibber which sang in our ears and drew at our brains as we toiled. We lit more torches, bathed our hands in the flame, and then, in defiance of the malign will, we demolished the quivering heap of earth which had mocked the form of a grave. We carried barrel after barrel of fuel, and poured it upon the squirming things, which were already spreading out, rolling like an ocean of filth at our very feet. And then, forgetting the machine which was to take us to safety, I hurled the box of black powder upon them, watched it sink through the mass until out of sight, then applied the torch. And fled.

"Art! The tractor—the rest of the oil we need to light our way out—"

I laughed insanely, and ran on.

A hundred yards away, we stopped and watched the spectacle. The flames, leaping fifty feet in air, illumined the forest around us, pushed back the thick unnatural gloom into the heavy darkness behind us. Unseen voices that howled madly and mouthed hysterical gibberish tore at our very souls in their wild pleading; so tangible were they that we felt them pull at our bodies, sway them back and forth with the unholy dance of the rocking trees. From the pit of foulness where the flames danced brightest, a dense cloud of yellow smoke arose; a vast frying sound shrilled through the wood, was echoed back upon us by the blackness around. The tractor was enveloped in flames, the last barrel of oil spouting fire. And then—

There came a deep, heavy-throated roar; the pulpy ground beneath our feet waved and shook; the roaring flames, impelled by an irresistible force beneath

them, rose simultaneously into air, curved out in long sweeping parabolas of lurid flame, and scattered over the moaning forest floor. The powder!

The house of the worm was destroyed; and simultaneously with its destruction the howling voices around us died into a heavy-throated whisper of silence. The black mist of darkness above and about shook for a moment like a sable silk, caught gropingly at us, then rolled back over the ruined trees and revealed—the sun!

The sun, bright in all his noonday glory, burst out full above us, warming our hearts with a golden glow.

"See, Art!" my companion whispered, "the forest is burning! There is nothing now to stop it, and everything will be destroyed."

It was true. From a thousand tiny places flames were rising and spreading, sending queer little creepers of flame to explore for further progress. The fire, scattered by the explosion, was taking root.

We turned, we walked swiftly into the breath of the warm south wind which swept down upon us; we left the growing fire at our backs and moved on. A half-hour later, after we had covered some two miles of fallen forest and odorous wasteland, we paused to look back. The fire had spread over the full width of the valley, and was roaring northward. I thought of the fifty refugees who had fled—also to the north.

"Poor devils!" I said. "But no doubt they are already dead; they could not endure for long the brightness of the sun."

AND so ends our story of what is perhaps the greatest single menace that has ever threatened mankind. Science pondered, but could make nothing of it; in fact, it was long before we could

evolve an explanation satisfactory even to ourselves.

We had searched vainly through every known reference book on the occult, when an old magazine suddenly gave us the clue: it recalled to our minds a half-forgotten conversation which has been reproduced at the beginning of this narrative.

In some strange way, this Cult of the Worm must have organized for the worship of death, and established their headquarters there in the valley. They built the huge grave as a shrine, and by the over-concentration upon worship of their fanatical minds, caused a physical manifestation to appear within it as the real result of their thought. And what suggestion of death could be more forceful than its eternal accompaniment—the worms of death and the bacteria of decay? Perhaps their task was lessened by the fact that death is always a reality, and does not need so great a concentration of will to produce. At any rate, from that beginning, that center, they radiated thought-waves strong enough to bring their influence over the region where they were active; and as they grew stronger and stronger, and as their minds grew more and more powerful through the fierce mental concentration, they spread out, and even destroyed light itself. Perhaps they received many recruits, also, to strengthen their ranks, as we ourselves nearly succumbed; perhaps, too, the land once conquered was watched over by spirits invoked to their control, so that no further strength on their part was required to maintain it. That would ex-

plain the weird noises heard from all parts of the forest, which persisted even after the worshippers themselves had fled.

And as to their final destruction, I quote a line from the old volume where we first read of the theory: "*If this be true, the only way to destroy it is to cease to believe.*" When the mock grave, their great fetish, was destroyed, the central bonds which held their system together were broken. And when the worshippers themselves perished in the flames, all possibility of a recurrence of the terror died with them.

This is only our explanation, and our belief. But Fred and I do not wish to engage in scientific debate; we only wish an opportunity to forget the chaotic experience which has so disrupted our lives.

Reward? We had our reward in the destruction of the vile thing we fought; yet to that satisfaction an appreciative world has added its wealth and its favor. These things we are thankful for and enjoy; what man does not? But we feel that not in adulation nor yet in pleasure lies our ultimate recovery. We must work, must forget the experience only by assiduous toil; we are stamping the horror, if not from our minds, at least from our immediate consciousness. In time, perhaps. . . .

And yet we can not entirely forget. Only this morning, while walking in the fields, I came across the dead carcass of a wild beast lying in a furrow; and in its thin, decaying body was another life—a nauseous, alien life of putrescence and decay.

